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Operational activities for development

Joint Inspection Unit

Meta-evaluation and synthesis of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluations, with a particular focus on poverty eradication

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the organizations of the United Nations system on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Meta-evaluation and synthesis of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluations, with a particular focus on poverty eradication" (see A/71/533).

The evaluation is one of two pilot evaluations conducted in accordance with the General Assembly policy for independent system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (A/68/658-E/2014/7). It was led by the Joint Inspection Unit in partnership with evaluation offices of United Nations system organizations. A significant number of stakeholders, including Member States, were also engaged.

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Summary

The meta-evaluation and synthesis exercise of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework examined both the quality of the Framework evaluations conducted during the period 2009-2014 and sought to draw conclusions from those evaluations to provide an assessment of the contribution of the United Nations system to poverty reduction. The evaluation was conceived as an opportunity to identify and highlight, in a systematic manner, the challenges related to the evaluative process of Framework activities, in order to guide decision-making for the strengthening of the overall value of Framework evaluations, as a mechanism.

The evaluation points to a lack of commitment by stakeholders in the Framework evaluation process, highlighted by the low level of compliance with the requirement for an evaluation and with recognized quality standards. Moreover, a low level of participation has been identified, along with significant issues regarding coordination and cooperation in the evaluation activities conducted by United Nations entities at the country level.

In its report (A/71/533), the Joint Inspection Unit makes five recommendations for strengthening both the Framework process itself and the evaluation mechanism. The present note reflects the consolidated views developed on the basis of inputs provided by organizations of the United Nations system.

I. Introduction

1. The meta-evaluation and synthesis exercise of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework examined both the quality of the Framework evaluations conducted during the period 2009-2014 and sought to draw conclusions from those evaluations to provide an assessment of the contribution of the United Nations system to poverty reduction. The evaluation was conceived as an opportunity to identify and highlight, in a systematic manner, the challenges related to the evaluative process of Framework activities, in order to guide decision-making for the strengthening of the overall value of Framework evaluations, as a mechanism.

II. General comments

2. Organizations of the United Nations system welcomed the report and supported the key conclusions and recommendations, noting that implementation of the recommendations would result in higher levels of effectiveness, reduced transaction costs and higher accountability for the United Nations Development Assistance Framework generally.

3. It was noted by organizations that national Governments tend to prefer their own national review processes over Framework-related evaluations and therefore may not see the value added of conducting a separate evaluation of the Framework. It was also noted that a lack of financial resources at the country level may not always be the primary reason for not undertaking Framework evaluations. In this context, it was observed that the United Nations Development Group's global cost-sharing arrangement for the resident coordinator system currently provides funding for every United Nations country team to support 10 coordination functions, including planning and oversight of the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks. Some country teams have made use of these funds to cover the costs of their Framework evaluations, and organizations suggest that this practice needs to become the norm; however, some organizations noted in the same context that the funds available for this end are insufficient. Moreover, it was noted that low compliance rates for Framework evaluations may not be the result of overlap and duplication with other agency-based evaluations, as is suggested in paragraph 110 of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit. What seems to be "overlap" may in reality be agency-based evaluations conducted because of specific donor requirements or the need for agencies to engage in evaluations as part of a government-led process. These evaluations are not necessarily duplicative of Framework evaluations. There was a suggestion that low compliance with Framework evaluations may also be the result of deficiencies during the budget planning and prioritization process, in which the need for an evaluation was not taken into consideration. It was also noted that the compliance rates for Framework evaluations have been improving. The introduction of the United Nations Development Group Information Management System in 2014 further permits the improved tracking of compliance rates for Framework evaluations. With regard to conclusion 2, in paragraph 111 of the report, that United Nations country teams are not convinced that the evaluation component of the Framework constitutes a vital and necessary element, the view was expressed that such a conclusion would have required in-depth interviews with resident coordinators, which was not part of the methodology. With regard to the fundamental conclusion that a more coordinated approach to agency-level

evaluations was required at the country level, it was mentioned that there would still be a need for agency-specific sectoral and thematic evaluations, given the specialized mandates of the different United Nations system organizations. It was unlikely that a Framework evaluation could completely replace the need for these evaluations.

4. Other general comments included observations by organizations that the report was by the Joint Inspection Unit instead of being a product of the independent system-wide evaluation initiative mandated in 2012 under the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, which requires a different approach and engagement with stakeholders than the normal Joint Inspection Unit approach.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination as appropriate, revise, through the United Nations Development Group, programming guidance for the United Nations Development Assistance Framework to emphasize the centrality of the active participation of Member States, especially programme countries, throughout the design and subsequent implementation and evaluation. This revised guidance for country teams and resident coordinators' offices should lay out clear guidelines and systematic approaches for interaction with officials of the Governments of the respective programme country and sensitization on programming principles related to their national development priorities and plans; and introduce a more systematic approach to mainstream the programming principles into the Framework process.

5. It was observed by organizations that the new interim United Nations Development Assistance Framework guidance, which was prepared by the Programme Working Group of the United Nations Development Group, is already placing more emphasis on the need to carry out evaluations. Finalized guidance is planned to be available by the end of 2016. It was also noted that in a recent desk review undertaken by the Development Operations Coordination Office, 23 out of 27 new United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks have included the establishment of joint United Nations/government steering committees, which are helping to provide strategic guidance and oversight for Framework implementation. This will help to enhance ownership and participation by national Governments. The new Framework guidance also emphasizes that the Framework evaluation should be part of the broader national evaluation framework of the national development plans. There is increased use of participatory approaches, including crowdsourcing and "foresight planning". The new guidance draws more attention to the need for stakeholder engagement generally and to the requirement for one evaluation to be conducted during the cycle. One agency drew attention to the fact that under the new Framework guidance, United Nations country teams will be responsible for the common country assessment, and that while it is the responsibility of the country teams to seek government involvement in the common country assessment, government approval is not required.

6. While organizations generally supported the recommendation, it was suggested that the recommendation could be improved through a reformulation, on the grounds that it contained too many separate action elements, which could potentially hinder the development of effective responses by operational agencies. It was suggested that the recommendation be regrouped by stakeholders for appropriate follow-up action. A suggestion was also made to remove the words "especially in programme countries", as the matter was of concern to all Member States.

Recommendation 2

The General Assembly should, through the quadrennial comprehensive policy review process, encourage Member States, especially programme countries, to more fully participate in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework process at the country level by means of early engagement during the development of upcoming Frameworks and participation to the fullest extent throughout their implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The Economic and Social Council should, within the quadrennial comprehensive policy review process, keep under constant review and monitor the measures taken by the United Nations country teams to facilitate the engagement of the programme countries throughout the Framework cycle, including its evaluation.

7. Organizations generally support the recommendation, noting that they have already taken steps to strengthen participation and ownership by national Governments, such as through the increased use of joint national and United Nations steering committees for overseeing the preparation of all United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks. It was stressed that it is important for Member States to properly finance relevant mandates, in particular, Framework evaluations, which can be very costly. It was also suggested that the recommendation could benefit from being reworded in a way that stressed the need to underline both the collaborative nature of the Framework exercise and its role in bringing added value to United Nations interventions within broader national processes.

Recommendation 3

The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives Board for Coordination as appropriate, initiate, through the United Nations Development Group, a process for sensitizing and specifically instructing resident coordinators on the importance of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluation process as a critical element in the overall United Nations country-level planning process; and, specifically, for requiring resident coordinators to develop an action plan and timetable for conducting Framework evaluations or follow-up evaluations on instruments, for example, sustainable development frameworks, and to integrate the conduct of Framework evaluations into the performance management framework of the resident coordinators.

8. Organizations support the recommendation, but some noted that the accountability for undertaking Framework evaluations also needed to be extended to the United Nations country teams' heads of agencies. Since Framework evaluations

often need to be supported through cost-sharing arrangements across agencies, the resident coordinator is unable to force compliance in the event that United Nations agencies are not in agreement to cover the costs.

9. It was also noted that the lack of adequate financing for these exercises remains a critical issue and that the resources available from the United Nations Development Group cost-sharing arrangement are not always sufficient to meet the requirements.

Recommendation 4

The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives Board for Coordination as appropriate, request other United Nations agencies to better coordinate their evaluation activities at the country level so that such activities can be better integrated into the United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluation process.

10. Organizations generally support this recommendation, noting that some success in this context has already been achieved in the case of two countries in which the Framework evaluations have been successfully harmonized with agency-specific evaluations. Organizations suggested that this experience needed to be scaled up to other countries so as to provide a more rigorous approach and to reduce the transactional burden on partners and enhance efficiency generally. One key challenge cited to achieving this end involves the current differences in programming cycles, timelines and methodologies used by different agencies on the basis of the specific requirements of their own governing bodies. It will be important to engage these bodies in the broader harmonization effort.

Recommendation 5

The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Chief Executives Board for Coordination as appropriate, revisit, through the United Nations Development Group, the 2010 United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluation guidelines and subsequent direction in the light of the findings of the present report, with a view to strengthening their methodological rigour and design and to increasing the rate of compliance; in particular, the modified guidance should:

(a) **Emphasize the requirement for actionable recommendations with a clear target audience and time frame for implementation that comply with the United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards;**

(b) **Document the mainstreaming of the Framework programming principles and, in particular, those relating to environmental sustainability;**

(c) **Utilize a robust evaluation design based on multiple data sources, in addition to desk-based (document) reviews and stakeholder interviews.**

11. Organizations support this recommendation, noting that the Programme Working Group of the United Nations Development Group will take it into account as part of the finalization of the Framework guidance, which will be available by the end of 2016. It was also noted that apart from guidance on how to prepare terms of reference and a guidance note for preparing management responses for Framework

evaluations issued by the United Nations Evaluation Group in 2012, there is currently no guidance available on how to conduct Framework evaluations. To ensure relevance, all Framework evaluations must seek to respect United Nations norms and standards for evaluation, which were updated by the United Nations Evaluation Group in 2016. It was suggested that the United Nations Evaluation Group be invited to provide additional support and guidance on evaluation methodologies, including expert advice on how to systematize the tracking of and reporting on the programming principles and their impact and support in establishing a roster of external consultants whose services could potentially be engaged to support the next generation of Framework evaluations. At the country level, it was noted that United Nations country teams should take the lead in organizing the Framework evaluation.